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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to aid parents in selecting high quality child care. A systematic method for identifying high quality child care focuses on three major program areas: the physical, learning, and teaching environments. The discussion helps parents become aware of appropriate questions about the physical environment, become familiar with the components of a learning environment which includes children's activities, and gain an understanding of the importance of trained, qualified staff. An accompanying checklist provides parents with a framework for identifying high quality child care. (Author/RH)

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HIGH QUALITY CHILD CARE: HOW TO IDENTIFY

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to aid parents in the selection of high quality child care. A systematic method for identifying high quality child care focuses on three major program areas; the Physical Environment, the Learning Environment, the Teaching Environment. Parents become aware of appropriate questions to ask about the physical environment, become familiar with the components of a learning environment which includes children's activities, and gain an understanding of the importance of trained, qualified staff. An accompanying "checklist" provides parents with a framework for identifying high quality child care.

Key Terms

High quality child care

Components of quality care

Child Care Checklist

Consumer guidelines for child care

HIGH QUALITY CHILD CARE

HOW TO IDENTIFY

Shopping for child care is often a confusing, overwhelming task. How do parents begin to explore this complex child care market? There are no consumer guide books outlining the best buy or quality brands available. However, choosing the best care for your child should demand at least as much time and effort as the purchase of a new car or VCR.

What is quality child care? What does it look like? How do parents find it? A systematic method for selecting child care can help parents with this major decision. The quest for quality care can be simplified by separating a program into three main areas or environments; the Physical Environment, the Learning Environment, the Teaching Environment.

The physical environment includes such things as the building, outdoor space, equipment, sanitation, ventilation, safety rules.[1] Parents can begin by asking specific questions. Is the facility clean and sanitary? Is someone trained in first aid? Will the food be nutritious? Some quesstions can be answered by observing daily activities such as mealtimes, napping, playtime. Are these routines handled in a relaxed reassuring manner? Are there enough adults to meet the needs of each child? Group size is important for quality care.[2] Questions about space and equipment include; Is there ample

space for children to play - inside and outside? Are there places for quiet activities? Is the equipment child-sized?

The learning environment provides a well balanced program for children's physical, intellectual, and social/emotional growth.[3] Children grow and learn through play. Play is a natural function of children and is the way they learn. The world is still very new to them and they learn best by direct experience.[4] Parents can assess program content by observing activities.

Physical Growth

Outdoor equipment - swings, jungle gym, slides, wagons, tricycles.

Planned exercise and dance.

Sand and water play.

Outdoor games.

Intellectual Growth

Puzzles and math games.

Blocks.

Painting and drawing materials.

Science center - rocks, magnets, seeds, plants.

Children's library.

Social/Emotional Growth[5]

Housekeeping and dress-up materials.

Planned group activities.

Story Time.

Cooking activities and mealtime.

The teaching environment reflects the attitude and philosophy of the entire staff. A quality child care program is only as good as its teachers.[1] When interviewing the staff parents can consider the following questions; Are the teachers knowledgeable about children's growth and development? Are they able to communicate in a warm, nurturing manner? Are they trained in positive discipline techniques?[6] It is strongly recommended that parents visit the center several times at different hours. Ask to see the center's license. Do not hesitate to ask questions and voice concerns.[7]

In addition to consumer guidelines and shopping techniques, it is important for parents to have a clear understanding of their needs - full or part time work, hours, location. The child's needs and abilities must also be considered when selecting an appropriate center - age, food preferences, medication. Wise consumer practices will allow parents to make informed, intelligent decisions about quality child care.

HIGH QUALITY CHILD CARE

Recommendations for child care selection:

Visit child care facility (several days at different times)

Interview director

Observe staff and children

Ask questions (license, staff credentials, philosophy)

Quality Checklist

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

	YES	NO	COMMENTS
Clean and attractive			
Nutritious food			
Ample space - inside/outside			
Equipment - child-sized			
First Aid - trained staff			
Safety rules posted			
Atmosphere - relaxed/reassuring			
Staff - organized/enthusiastic			
Children - secure/comfortable			
Appropriate child/staff ratio			

Quality Checklist

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

	YES	NO	COMMENTS
Physical Development			
Outside - Wheel toys			
Climbing apparatus			
Structured activities			
Sand/water play			
Inside - Planned exercise			
Creative dance			
Movement activities			
Intellectual Development			
Formal/informal instruction			
Creative art			
Manipulative games/puzzles			
Blocks			
Housekeeping area			
Book corner			
Science/math activities			
Carpentry area			
Water/sand play			
Social/Emotional Development			
Storytime			
Music			
Dramatic play			
Creative expression			
Sensory activities - tasting, touching, smelling, seeing, hearing, moving			
Cooking - Nutrition education			
Self-help skills			
Mealtime/clean-up			

Quality Checklist

TEACHING ENVIRONMENT

	YES	NO	COMMENTS
Staff - Trained/Qualified			
Organized/Enthusiastic			
Warm/Nurturing			
Invites parent involvement			
Provides parent education			
On-going staff development			

Child Care Selection Follow-Up

Periodic spontaneous visits

On-going communication with director, staff, and other parents

Talk and listen to your child

Ask questions, voice concerns, make suggestions

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